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from debilitating panic attacks. Panic attacks that were so bad that it was hard for me to take a walk around the block in a neighborhood that I had grown up in and come back to. I was also mid-divorce and thankfully my husband was all for me taking the vacation.

Before I left, there was a flurry of paperwork that needed to be done. Our house had just been put on the market. There was a power of attorney executed for my father to act on my behalf in case our house sold. My sister insisted I make a last will and testament in case something happened to me while traveling. She didn't want my small estate or the house to go to my soon-to-be ex.

As it was my first trip alone, I decided to go on a three-week-long tour of Italy with a tour company. A risk, as I'm inherently a shy person and not fond of group activities. The thought rose in my mind of a tour group following an umbrella held in the air. But the company guaranteed that wouldn't happen and the itinerary highlighted many parts of Italy that I had loved from previous trips. The upsides were I didn't have to worry about transportation and there was plenty of time on our own where we could explore, and of course for me, shop. I tacked on a few days before the tour started so I could get accustomed to the time change and added five days in Paris at the end. All in all, I would be gone almost five weeks. A long time to be absent from the goings-on at home.

The absolute pinnacle of my trip was an afternoon I spent getting delightfully lost in the back streets of Venice. I wasn't concerned a bit, knowing that I could always find my way back to the hotel via the small arrows on some of the buildings that direct you to San Marco square.

I was giddy with the feeling of being by myself. No other tour members in sight. No one speaking English within earshot. I wandered into a small artisan jewelry shop that specialized in items made of glass and fell in love with a ring. Unfortunately, it wasn't the correct size. The proprietress bade me to go away and come back in a bit and she would have made it larger for me.

So, I wandered down the alley and came upon a pizza place. An uncommon sight



Author Ann Dudley writes of her travels, and delights, while on a trip to Italy.

to see someplace that would sell me a single slice. It was my lucky day. They had a carciofi pizza made and I could have a slice of it. The young woman behind the counter made me say it in Italian, and she praised me for my pronunciation. Carciofi is a tongue twister for me. But as I love artichokes, I had practiced the word until I had it down.

I took my slice of artichoke pizza and a can of Coke (also known in my family as

the nectar of the gods) and left the small pizza place. Across the alley, there was a set of stairs that went directly into a canal.

I sat down on the top step. The water lapped at my feet. The sky overhead was the perfect shade of blue. The distinct aroma of Venice (part sea, part Italian restaurant, part sewer) was around me. As I ate my humble lunch, I realized something. No one knew where I was. Not my husband, the tour group, my parents, friends

or family.

And I smiled. My heart was full. The meal was both one of the simplest and most memorable I've ever had. Some of the best few moments of my life.

(P.S. And in the true spirit of me and jewelry, I not only bought one ring, but I also bought two.)

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